



Book review of Whittaker, Andrea (ed.) 2010. Abortion in Asia: local dilemmas, global politics. New York: Berghahn Books. 248 pp

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Published in:
Social Anthropology

DOI:
[10.1111/j.1469-8676.2011.00168_14.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2011.00168_14.x)

Publication date:
2011

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Wahlberg, A. (2011). Book review of Whittaker, Andrea (ed.) 2010. Abortion in Asia: local dilemmas, global politics. New York: Berghahn Books. 248 pp. *Social Anthropology*, 19(3), 360-361.
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2011.00168_14.x

Whittaker, Andrea (ed) 2010. *Abortion in Asia : local dilemmas, global politics*. New York: Berghahn Books, 248pp., Hb.: \$70.00/£40.00, ISBN 978-1-84545-734-1

As a medical act, induced abortion can be defined as the termination of an unwanted pregnancy.

As a procedure it is both routine and controversial. Carried out under appropriate conditions induced abortions are associated with a low risk of mortality and health complications, yet such risks rise dramatically when performed in unsafe conditions.

In *Abortion in Asia*, Andrea Whittaker and a range of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds set out to shed light on the practice of induced abortions in Asian countries from the perspective of the women who seek abortions and the regulators and health advocates involved in lobbying for laws, policies and programmes to ensure safe access to abortion services. As Whittaker points out, there has been surprisingly little social scientific study of abortion practices in Asia given the region's demographics. Of an estimated 40 million annual induced abortions worldwide, over half (26 million) take place in Asia, and of these an estimated 10.5 million are unsafe leading to the loss of some 35,000 Asian women's lives and to the hospitalisation of many thousands if not millions more. The figures are staggering. Yet, while such demographic mapping of the incidence and impact of unsafe abortions is important in itself, what we get through the chapters in this book is insight into the experience of seeking out an abortion as well as legal and advocacy efforts to ensure safe abortion in different Asian countries.

In chapters 2 to 6, we are introduced to the stories of among others Oung (a Cambodian mother of four), Vân (a 23 year-old Hanoian woman), Rosina (living in a Bangladeshi slum), Malika (from Tamil Nadu) and a Burmese woman working in a Thai factory. Each story is a powerful reminder

that unwanted pregnancies cannot be understood in isolation and must instead be placed into the life circumstances and courses of the women and couples involved. There is no easy way to define what an 'unwanted' pregnancy is, rather it is a complex judgement made in very particular cultural, socio-economic and psycho-social contexts. Indeed some 'wanted' pregnancies may become 'unwanted', for example, as Gammeltoft shows, when an ultrasound scan reveals an 'abnormal foetus' in Vietnam.

What we also learn from these chapters is that, especially in resource poor contexts where access to safe abortion is limited, there is an entire logistics to abortion involving scoping of options (herbal abortifacients, 'stick abortions', deep abdominal massage, pharmaceuticals, vacuum aspiration, etc.), fundraising, negotiating 'referral rackets', transportation, etc. Some will 'borrow considerable sums of money to fund abortions with providers with a perceived better quality of service' (p.142), while many others will end up putting their lives and health at risk. Indeed, in a chapter on why Burmese women living on the Thai border choose abortions, Suzanne Belton documents how desperation, poverty and violence can produce unwanted pregnancies.

In the second half of the book (chapters 7 to 10) readers must, somewhat abruptly, change focus from the abortion experiences of Asian women to the political and legal conditions surrounding abortion. In a chapter on the politics of abortion in Vietnam, Wolf *et al.* show how the State's situating of abortion services within a broader family planning framework has facilitated the improvement of abortion services throughout the country. In Indonesia, on the other hand, as Hull and Widyanoro show numerous attempts at legal reform which would improve the safety and quality of abortion services in the country have been successively thwarted over the last decades not least because of religious opposition. Malaysia and Thailand lie somewhere in between with

relatively conducive legal frameworks pitted against problems of implementation and commitment.

In the epilogue to *Abortion in Asia*, Whittaker argues convincingly that the 'study of abortion requires a multilayered perspective that pays attention to reproductive practices, negotiations and resistances and their interconnections at a local and global level' (p.247). Indeed, the book's multilayered collection of richly empirical chapters demonstrates this. Where the book does fall short however is in making the link to the global level. Readers are left unsure of whether we learn something in particular from studying abortion practices in Asia as opposed to say Europe or America. Insight into sex selective abortion practices in China and India, for example, is a crucial omission. Nonetheless, *Abortion in Asia* makes an empirically rich and important contribution to social scientific scholarship on induced abortion practices and will hopefully inspire further studies.

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